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SHOWING SECRETS: A U.S. COMPROMISE

Intelligence Aides Persuaded
President Not to Display
Satellite Photographs

By PHILIP TAUBMAN
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WASHINGTON, March 23 — President Reagan's use of aerial reconnaissance photographs today to illustrate Soviet military expansion in the Caribbean region represented a compromise among his national security advisers about the disclosure of classified information, according to intelligence officials.

Mr. Reagan and the White House adviser on national security, William P. Clark, these officials said, considered declassifying photographs taken by American satellites that show new military installations and armament factories inside the Soviet Union. These photographs, which have constituted the centerpiece of a highly classified Defense Department presentation about Soviet military abilities, were described by intelligence officials as the best visual illustration of the Soviet Union's buildup of arms and military-related industries.

Defense and intelligence officials, however, argued that disclosure of these photographs would break the Government's longstanding policy of not declassifying the products of satellite surveillance.

Fear of Tipping Off Moscow

Although the public has known for more than a decade that the United States and the Soviet Union use satellites to spy on each other, the American Government has never declassified satellite photographs. Intelligence officials said the main reason was concern that publication of such photographs could tip off the Soviet Union about advances in American surveillance technology.

The intelligence agencies also feared that declassification of even one satellite photograph would open the way for public requests for other pictures under the Freedom of Information Act.

Because of these concerns, which senior Administration officials said were presented directly to the President by top defense and intelligence aides, Mr. Reagan agreed to use less sensitive photographs of areas outside the Soviet Union taken by manned reconnaissance aircraft.

Mr. Reagan said the four black-and-white photographs he displayed showed military installations in Cuba, Grenada and Nicaragua that intelligence analysts said were built with Soviet equipment and assistance.

Two of the photographs, of airfields in Nicaragua and Grenada, have been previously made public, according to Pentagon officials. Both airfields, which include Soviet equipment, were built with Cuban help, the officials said.

Intelligence officials said the photographs were taken by American reconnaissance aircraft at high altitude. The Government primarily uses two types of spy planes for such missions, the U-2, first developed in the 1950's and used for surveillance flights over the Soviet Union until one was shot down in 1960, and the SR-71, a more advanced aircraft that went into use in the late 1960's.

Both planes are equipped with equipment capable of providing high-resolution photographs taken while flying at altitudes as high as 15 miles. Satellites, which orbit 200 to 300 miles above the earth, are fitted with more advanced equipment that intelligence officials said can clearly show objects as small as one square foot.

Often Shown to Visitors

Dozens of these photographs are used in the Pentagon's presentation about Soviet military growth. The presentation, which is classified top secret, is often shown to visiting heads of state and members of Congress.

Senator Walter D. Huddleston, Democrat of Kentucky and a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said today that Mr. Reagan's use of aerial photographs was an example "of selective disclosure of national security information to promote one side of the debate."

Last year the Administration made public several dozen aerial photographs of military installations in Nicaragua that officials said were built with Soviet and Cuban aid and represented a threat to security in Central America.

The House Intelligence Committee later reported that the Administration had failed to mention other intelligence information available at the time that showed Nicaragua had no plans to take military action against neighboring countries.

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